

Government of Alberta ■

# The Lesser Slave Lake Region One Year Stronger, Together



## Recovery

The *Lesser Slave Lake Regional Wildfire Recovery Plan* was created in collaboration with the Town of Slave Lake, the Municipal District of Lesser Slave River No. 124, and the Sawridge First Nation and guides recovery efforts in the Lesser Slave Lake region.



On May 14, 2011, wildfires burned in the Municipal District of Lesser Slave River No. 124, near the Town of Slave Lake and the Sawridge First Nation.

### Goal

"To return the region to its pre-disaster state, while ensuring that its communities are not socially, environmentally or economically disadvantaged by the wildfire event and are well-positioned for future growth."

### Priorities

#### PEOPLE

*Ensure the right resources are in place to support the communities' needs and individuals' safety, health, physical, mental, and social well-being.*

#### RECONSTRUCTION

*Rebuild the residential, commercial and public buildings and the associated utilities that were damaged or destroyed.*

#### ECONOMY

*Support the economic recovery of the region to ensure that people, business and industry, infrastructure and government are well supported to return to normalcy.*

#### ENVIRONMENT

*Protect and re-establish a healthy environment for the benefit of nature and residents.*

## A year like none other

It has been a year like none other for the thousands of people in the Lesser Slave Lake region who endured incredible loss and devastation in the wake of the wildfires of May 2011 – and who, in the aftermath of the disaster, have gathered and regrouped to tackle the overwhelming task of rebuilding homes, businesses, neighbourhoods and lives.

Through it all, the people of the Lesser Slave Lake region are showing the world the great perseverance and strength of character it takes to recover.

The scale of the wildfire disaster – and the immediate response to it – was like nothing else seen in this province. Almost 15,000 people were forced to flee as the fires, carried along by high winds, bore down on the Town of Slave Lake and nearby areas. Many families and individuals took shelter in evacuation centres set up hastily in at least 10 communities in the northern part of the province. It was the largest displacement of residents in the history of Alberta.

Thanks to the dedication of the emergency responders and the respectfulness and mutual concern of the residents, no lives were lost directly related to the fire. However, Mr. Jean-Luc Deba, a helicopter pilot from Montreal assisting with the firefighting efforts, was killed when the helicopter he was piloting crashed while filling a water bucket from the lake.

In the days following the fires, officials assessed the level of destruction in the town, the Municipal District of Lesser Slave River No. 124, and the Sawridge First Nation. A quarter of the town was destroyed. More than 730 households lost their homes. The wildfires destroyed or damaged residential and commercial properties, the town hall, town offices, the library, and most provincial government offices. Fortunately, the First Nation experienced only minor damage to its infrastructure. All told, the Lesser Slave Lake area wildfire of May 2011 proved to be the second costliest disaster in Canadian history.

### Largest displacement of residents in Alberta's history

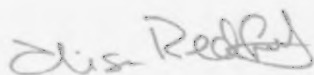
- almost 15,000 people evacuated for nearly two weeks
- a quarter of the Town of Slave Lake destroyed
- 734 households lost their homes

The devastating events of May 2011 will be recalled and retold for years to come. Yet as the grief and ordeals are remembered, there will also be stories of courage, personal sacrifice, teamwork, mutual support, and remarkable leadership. These qualities of character have enabled the survivors of the wildfires to embark on the rebuilding of their homes and the revival of community life.

The Alberta government places high priority on the rebuilding and recovery process in the Lesser Slave Lake region. The province has committed \$289 million to response and recovery efforts in the region, including \$125.3 million in disaster recovery funding, \$56.7 million to community stabilization efforts, \$42.8 million for interim housing, and \$64.2 million to longer-term projects identified in the Lesser Slave Lake Regional Wildfire Recovery Plan.

Our role is significant, but primarily behind the scenes as we work closely with local leaders and administrators to help identify needs and provide financial and other assistance on behalf of all Albertans. We have great respect for the exemplary leadership and collaborative spirit shown by the regional Tri-Council, composed of elected officials from the town, municipal district and First Nation. We are impressed by the expertise and dedication of the Chief Administrative Officer Secretariat, the group which implements Tri-Council's direction on the long and steady road to regional recovery and growth. In addition, we would like to acknowledge the extraordinary efforts of municipal and First Nation's staff in responding to residents' questions and restoring their organizations' capacity. We are inspired by your communities' level of determination and we will stay on as your steadfast partner.

We believed it was fitting to prepare this document to mark the first anniversary of the events of May 2011. In it, we highlight a few of the region's many achievements of the past year, and some of the ways in which the provincial government has worked in support of community leaders in meeting urgent needs. We hope it stands as a testament to the strength and resilience of the Lesser Slave Lake region.



Alison Redford

Premier

May 15, 2012



Emergency responders leave the area over two weeks after the wildfires swept through the Lesser Slave Lake region.

## People

People are the highest priority of the response and recovery efforts. We are working together to ensure the right resources are in place to support the communities' needs and individuals' safety, health, physical, mental, and social well-being.

### A Safe Re-entry

On May 14, 2011, states of local emergency were declared by the Town of Slave Lake and the Municipal District of Lesser Slave River No. 124 as wildfires burned in the municipal district, near the town and the Sawridge First Nation. The next day, 100-kilometre winds spread the wildfire and grounded water bombers, and the Area Emergency Operations Centre ordered an evacuation of the town. Nearly 15,000 people were evacuated from the region, with no serious injuries or fatalities, for what would turn out to be a period of almost two weeks.

As the wildfires blazed, firefighters and other emergency responders were dispatched from across Alberta and Canada to assist the regional fire service. In Edmonton, the Provincial Operations Centre ramped up to its highest level of activation, called in personnel from across the Alberta government, and set up contact with the local Emergency Operations Centre.

The successful evacuation of residents was the result of many factors. However, additional access at major intersections has been identified as a means to enhance traffic flow in the future. The intersection at Highways 88 and 2 will be upgraded as part of the community recovery.

As the days passed and the wildfires subsided, emergency officials turned their attention to the immense task of recovery. One of the first tasks in the disaster recovery process was to prepare for the return of evacuated residents into the region. In planning for the re-entry, officials made safety their top priority.

The preparation for re-entry called for the expertise of essential workers with the skills to undertake massive clean-up efforts, restore essential services and utilities, and help with the immediate needs of returning residents. Among this vital group were local health care staff, members of the local RCMP detachment, sanitary disposal crews, ATCO employees, and some government staff (municipal and provincial), many of whom had lost, or had damage to, their own homes in the disaster.



Fire fighting resources and emergency responders came from all over Canada to help.



Emergency responders work to put out smoldering debris.

In the aftermath of an emergency of this magnitude, one of the most pressing challenges faced by community leaders is the need for human and material resources – including people to help coordinate the many tasks and activities involved in the recovery process.

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### Rebuilding Capacity

Recognizing that the town, municipal district and First Nation would need greater capacity to maintain progress with their recovery efforts as well as their day to day activities over the longer term, the Alberta government has been providing support on the ground in addition to financial assistance. Support has been provided for administrative needs, such as work related to finance, records, and ongoing communications, and for increased firefighting capacity through funding for equipment and an additional firefighter who will also be able to help with emergency management planning.

This long-term support also includes the creation of a Regional Recovery Coordination Group of up to eight employees and/or contractors who are helping local authorities to plan and coordinate the various recovery and legacy projects. Most of this support for human resource needs is in place for three years.

### Social Recovery

Another key to recovery and long-term success is adequate social, health, and educational services. The communities of the Lesser Slave Lake area have a high level of expertise in these areas. The Slave Lake Wellness Committee, for example, is a community-based team that assists in social recovery and in building local capacity to support individuals and families. The team was formed by a group of local health and wellness professionals led by Family and Community Support Services, and its community wellness initiatives include a monthly speaker series, family fun nights and a wellness conference to coincide with the anniversary of the wildfire. The team includes representatives from a wide range of organizations: Alberta Health Services, Alberta Human Services, the regional Child and Family Services Authority, Slave Lake Victim Services Society, High Prairie School Division, Living Waters Catholic School Division, Alberta Municipal Affairs, the Canadian Red Cross, Slave Lake Native Friendship Centre, Sawridge First Nation and Family and Community Support Services. As a partner in the recovery process, the Alberta Government is assisting in a financial capacity.

To help schools in the region maintain their "pre-fire" levels of service, provincial funding was provided to the three school authorities on the basis of budgeted, rather than actual, enrolment for the school year. To help meet the need for services for those under stress because of the wildfire crisis, funding has been provided for an additional 2.5-person capacity in the region's victims services.

To help maintain a strong, healthy and vibrant population and workforce into the future, funding has been allocated for use in promoting wellness and attracting and retaining health care professionals to the region. A new family care clinic has opened, with plans to connect health services with social supports.



Emergency responders welcome residents home.



With assistance from the Roland Michener Secondary School art students; children from CJ Schurter School created a mural called "Hope is on Our Hands."

## Community Spirit

As part of the healing process, people need opportunities to come together to commemorate the events of the past year and celebrate their community's resilience. A number of community spirit initiatives are being held in the region, including:

- a "Building a Resilient Community Wellness Conference" and a week-long series of community events for the one-year anniversary of the wildfire;
- a memorial to recognize the heroic efforts of Mr. Jean-Luc Deba, the helicopter pilot who lost his life fighting the wildfire; and
- a community legacy project is being scoped out, which could combine an expanded evacuation centre with community facilities and grounds, such as baseball diamonds.

In the days after the evacuation, Albertans reached out to help residents of the region with an outpouring of donations. Donation centres were set up in four municipalities, and evacuation centres were set up in ten locations: Athabasca, Westlock, Boyle, Edmonton, High Prairie, Grande Prairie, Peace River, Valleyview, Smith and Wabasca. These efforts were a valuable source of help to those struggling with great loss.

Now Albertans are watching in awe as community life in the region rises again, literally, from the ashes! Albertans have a strong admiration for the leaders and communities of the Lesser Slave Lake region.

## Financial help from the province

To help meet the needs related to this "people" component of the region's recovery plan, the Alberta government committed funding for the following purposes:

- emergency accommodation for essential workers;
- administrative support; Regional Recovery Coordination Group;
- additional firefighting capacity;
- intersection upgrade at Highways 88 and 2;
- additional school funding based on budgeted enrolment;
- victims services;
- health and wellness;
- community spirit initiatives;
- initial disaster response by government (staff time – 13 ministries);
- municipal costs of setting up evacuation centres; and
- costs for storing and managing donations.

# Reconstruction

The rebuilding of the residential, commercial and public buildings, and associated utilities, that were damaged or destroyed by the wildfire is essential to people returning to their normal lives, and to positioning the region for future growth.

## Interim housing site preparation

- 17 hectares cleared
- 310,000 cubic metres of fill brought in
- 31,000 truckloads of gravel used
- 80% of resources and 60% of contractors locally sourced

## Housing

Housing reconstruction has been proceeding at an astounding pace!

### Permanent housing:

By March 2012 – not even a full year after the wildfire disaster – 16 houses in the town and six in the municipal district had been rebuilt and occupied. Another 145 in the town and 17 in the municipal district were under construction. These statistics signal how closely residents feel tied to the Lesser Slave Lake region and their wish to stay in their communities.

### Interim housing:

In the fall of 2011, nearly 250 families were provided with temporary housing for a two- to three-year period in record time. A total of 233 modular units were installed on a number of sites in the region (32 in the municipal district; 90 in Phoenix Heights; 80 in Sunset Place; and 31 in four small locations in town.) The province also purchased the 34-unit Heritage Apartments.

The Interim Housing Project has been a highly innovative partnership of the town, the municipal district, and the Alberta government. The temporary housing gives residents time to rebuild their own homes or make other arrangements for permanent housing. The table on the next page shows the greatly accelerated pace at which tasks were completed to make this housing ready for residents.



New homes being built in the south eastern part of the Town of Slave Lake, one of the residential areas most impacted by the wildfire.



*Kitchen camp set up to provide all the food for the fire fighters, emergency responders, and other volunteers during the evacuation.*

| Modular Unit Development Tasks   | Normal Timelines     | Interim Housing Project Timelines |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Engineering plans                | 6-8 months           | 15 days                           |
| Site grading and services        | 3-4 months           | 35 days                           |
| Unit delivery and utility hookup | 20-25 days per phase | 10-15 days per phase              |
| Stairs and skirting              | 10-15 days per phase | 5-10 days per phase               |

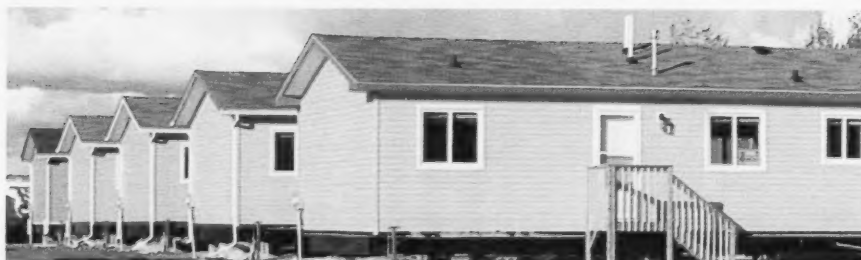
Households with school-aged children were in interim housing by the end of September 2011. Tenancy was based on priority need to ensure the community's continued re-establishment, to accommodate families for the beginning of the school year, and to provide for those living in unsustainable housing (e.g., campgrounds, hotels or overcrowded conditions). Rent for interim housing is set at pre-fire rates, and includes social and affordable housing rates.

#### ***Emergency housing:***

In the early stages of the disaster response, an emergency program was put into place for evacuees who were uninsured and had limited financial resources to provide for their housing needs. Individuals were provided with access to social housing, private rental market housing, or alternative housing such as campus residential housing.

In the first phase of the program, emergency housing was provided for 117 households. The program covered up to 100 per cent of the costs of rent, moving, deposits, and utilities until August 31, 2011. In the second phase of the program, people were given the opportunity to stay in their rental accommodation beyond August 31, receiving a rent subsidy of up to 60 per cent but assuming utility costs. Forty-two households received the rent subsidy from September 1 to November 30, 2011.

These initiatives to provide emergency and temporary housing have been vitally important in bringing some stability into the lives of individuals and families who were unable to go back to their own homes and demonstrates the outcome of effective collaboration. The projects are key achievements of the municipal and provincial partners in the Lesser Slave Lake area recovery effort.



*Some of the modular homes brought in as part of the Interim Housing Project.*



Many of the region's scenic hiking and cross country ski trails were damaged.



Minister of Municipal Affairs, Doug Griffiths, Premier Alison Redford and Minister of Health and Wellness, Fred Horne, talk with local officials during a visit on October 27, 2011.

## Municipal Infrastructure

Residents began a phased re-entry into the evacuated area on May 25 to 27, 2011. In the town, 13,521 meters (44,360 feet) of fencing was installed around the fire zone for the safety of returning residents. The clean-up of fire debris began on July 7 and was completed by September 30, 2011, months earlier than expected.

The wildfires caused extensive damage to the town's infrastructure. An engineering study has been conducted to assess the non-insurable damage to the town's infrastructure, which includes damage to:

- street pavement and roads;
- sidewalks and curbs;
- street lights and overhead cross walk signals;
- cycling/walking paths;
- fire hydrants and water shut-off valves;
- subdivision fencing;
- underground sanitary and storm sewer lines;
- bridges;
- park playground equipment;
- flood berm and dike;
- town landscaping; and
- town ditches.

Funding has been committed by the Alberta government toward the costs of the extensive work involved in reconstructing the town's damaged infrastructure.



Construction is underway to rebuild the provincial government's regional offices.



FireSmart activities carried out by the Sawridge First Nation ensure easy access for fire service professionals to forested areas and provides little fuel for fires encroaching on populated areas.

### Fire Prevention Initiatives

It is important to consider fire prevention initiatives as part of the reconstruction effort. One significant initiative in this regard will be the expansion of the Widewater Firehall in the Municipal District of Lesser Slave River.

In building their vision for the future of their communities, the municipal district, town and First Nation have seized the opportunity to become a model FireSmart community. The provincial FireSmart Program is based on wildfire mitigation practices and preparedness planning. The program advocates for homeowners, landowners and municipalities to assess wildfire hazards and put appropriate FireSmart practices into place in relation to the hazards they identify.

FireSmart initiatives in the Lesser Slave Lake region include education and awareness initiatives, installation of dry hydrants in areas across the municipal district, the hiring of a local fire prevention officer, and vegetation management on 438 hectares, resulting in the safe removal of standing black spruce and the thinning and pruning of other vegetation. Funds have also been made available for the Sawridge First Nation to refresh and implement their FireSmart plan.

### Financial help from the province

To help meet the needs related to the "reconstruction" component of the region's recovery plan, the Alberta government committed funding for the following purposes:

- emergency housing;
- interim housing and related costs;
- town infrastructure reconstruction;
- Widewater Firehall expansion; and
- FireSmart initiatives.



Widewater Firehall, which was destroyed by the wildfire, has been expanded and is almost complete.

## Economy

A third pillar of the recovery is supporting the economic recovery of the region to ensure that people, business and industry, infrastructure and government are well supported to return to normalcy.

### Individual Support

The wildfires had a significant impact on personal finances. In the urgency to evacuate, many residents left their homes without personal debit or credit cards and had difficulty accessing their financial accounts. Most residents, other than the workers preparing for re-entry, were unable to go back to their jobs for the duration of the two-week evacuation, or longer. These issues were soon clear to emergency officials, and the province provided immediate financial assistance to displaced people in the amount of \$1,250 per adult and \$500 per child.

#### Assistance Program

- \$14.5 million provided to evacuated residents through debit cards, direct deposit or cheques
- 14,943 people (7,456 families) received funding: \$1,250 per adult and \$500 per child

### Small Business Support

Eight commercial buildings were lost in the wildfire. Moreover, small businesses were greatly affected by loss of business during the evacuation, and continued to see losses as residents and activity slowly returned to the region.

In recognition of the hardships faced by small business, the Agriculture Financial Services Corporation (AFSC) waived the application fees for small businesses in the disaster area who apply for loans through AFSC's regular programs, as well as offering interest-free loans for 24 months, and up to 24 months without payments. By mid-April 2012, AFSC had approved 92 applications for \$66.3 million in loans and was processing another 75 applications for \$37 million.

### Local Government Support

With support from the Alberta government, the town and municipal district have been able to forgive the 2011 property taxes that would have been owed by residents with destroyed or uninhabitable property.

To make up for this shortfall in the municipalities' tax revenue, the province committed funding to help stabilize their revenue as the local property assessment base is rebuilt. This spared property owners from the burden of paying taxes on destroyed or uninhabitable homes, and reimbursed the two municipalities for foregone income.

A significant portion of the region's property tax base was destroyed by the wildfire. The total value of the 2011 residential assessment dropped by 21.2 percent in the town, and by 4.8 percent in the municipal district as a result of fire damage or destruction of homes.



Renee Hall Square, Main Street, Town of Slave Lake.



Entire neighbourhoods were destroyed by the 2011 wildfires.



Northern Lakes College served as the Emergency Operations Command Centre throughout the 2011 wildfire.

|                                                                         | Town of Slave Lake | Municipal District of Lesser Slave River No. 124 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Pre-fire residential assessment value                                   | \$557.6 million    | \$408.9 million                                  |
| Post-fire residential assessment value                                  | \$439.4 million    | \$389.0 million                                  |
| Percent difference                                                      | 21.2%              | 4.8%                                             |
| 2011 residential taxes forgiven (reimbursed through provincial funding) | \$1.2 million      | \$89 thousand                                    |

### Future Growth

The Government of Alberta is working with the local Chamber of Commerce to establish a Rural Alberta Business Centre in the town, and will also be providing an economic development officer to the town and municipal district to help the region develop an economic development plan for future growth.

To support the region's growth, funding has been provided to improve the area's water supply, and the initial scoping and assessment of the \$20 million water line project is underway. The economic vibrancy of the Mitsue industrial area will be enhanced as construction proceeds on a new firehall. The firehall is in the planning phase, with consulting engineers working on project design.

### Financial help from the province

To help meet the needs related to the "economy" component of the region's recovery plan, the Alberta government committed funding for the following purposes:

- financial assistance to evacuees;
- small business support to access loans through Agriculture Financial Services Corporation;
- reimbursement to municipalities for foregone residential and non-residential property taxes;
- new Mitsue firehall; and
- improvements to area's water supply.

## Environment

A final principle of the regional recovery efforts is to protect and re-establish a healthy environment. This principle underpins many of the projects undertaken in relation to the three other components of the regional recovery plan: people, reconstruction and economy.

Environmental matters are a top-of-mind consideration of community and provincial officials in all aspects of the recovery process in the Lesser Slave Lake region. In their planning for safe re-entry and reconstruction efforts, a great deal of collaboration occurred among representatives of the communities, Alberta Health and Wellness, Alberta Health Services, and Alberta Environment and Water.

One key priority was to assess the environmental conditions of the region. Understanding how the fire impacted the air, water, and soil in the community was critical to protecting human health and the environment. Environmental monitoring by the provincial government for several months after the wildfires confirmed that there should be no negative lasting impacts from the wildfires on the environment or human health. In addition to this ongoing attention to environmental matters, the local governments have identified as a priority the need for an earthen barrier to provide further fire attenuation and a noise reduction barrier for communities bordering onto Highway 88. This \$1 million berm is being designed and is expected to be constructed in the coming year.

### *Financial help from the province*

To help meet the needs related to the "environment" component of the region's recovery plan, the Alberta government committed funding for the following purposes:

- Structure for fire and noise protection; and
- Vegetation management.



A view from the south shore of Lesser Slave Lake in the MD.

## How Do I Get Involved?

If you are interested in participating in the *Lessons Learned Review* by sharing your experiences, please go to: [www.slavelakerecovery.com](http://www.slavelakerecovery.com) or the Facebook page: [Lesser Slave Lake Region Wildfires: Lessons Learned Review](#).

### Community Interviews on Lessons Learned

The magnitude of the Lesser Slave Lake regional disaster is unprecedented in Canada, and it required a heroic, multi-faceted, cross-jurisdictional response to the immediate crisis and to the immense task that lay beyond: the recovery of the community as a whole. The Alberta government believes it is vitally important to identify lessons from the response to the wildfires. These learnings will help ensure that the future response to any similar crisis in Alberta is managed in the most effective manner.

The province has engaged KPMG to conduct interviews and focus groups with those affected by and/or involved in the response to the disaster – including community members, emergency responders, evacuation hosts, the public, and leaders and staff working for the town, municipal district, First Nation, and Alberta government. The aim of this review is not only to identify lessons and catalogue procedures for use in future crises – but also to provide people who were affected by this disaster with the opportunity to talk about their experiences as part of their personal and community renewal.



Former Alberta Premier Ed Stelmach, Town of Slave Lake Mayor Karina Pillay-Kinnee, and Municipal District of Lesser Slave River No. 124 Reeve Denny Garratt talk with Their Royal Highnesses, The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, during their visit to the region on July 6, 2011, about seven weeks after the wildfires.

## Milestones

In looking back on the past year, there have been many milestones along the long road to full recovery in the Lesser Slave Lake region. Following are a few of the key dates associated with the wildfire crisis of May 2011, the immediate response, and the process of rebuilding and recovery.



Many homes were completely destroyed.



First new home rebuilt in the town.

### 2011

- May 14 – States of local emergency declared by the Town of Slave Lake and Municipal District of Lesser Slave River No. 124
- May 15 – Evacuation ordered
- May 16 – Slave Lake Recovery Task Force established
- May 20 – Pilot Jean-Luc Deba, of Montreal, dies in helicopter crash
- May 22 – Re-entry plan approved
- May 23-24 – Bus tours set up for evacuees
- May 24 – The Social Recovery Centre at St. Mary's School is established
- May 25 – Residents begin phased re-entry
- May 27 – All road blocks removed
- June 1 – State of local emergency ends
- June 11 – Housing Information Fair
- June 20 – Local clean-up efforts begin
- June 24 – St. Mary's Social Recovery Centre last day of operations
- July 6 – Their Royal Highnesses, The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge visit
- July 7 – Clean-up of fire debris begins by insurance companies
- September 30 – Clean-up of fire debris complete
- September 30 – First "key transfer" for rebuilt permanent housing
- September 30 – All families with school age children in interim housing
- November 1 – All 233 interim housing units ready for occupancy

### 2012

- January 11 – Tri-Council approves the first funding envelope for FireSmart initiatives
- February 11 – Library re-opens in its temporary location
- April 16 – Family Care Centre opens
- April 30 – The Fieldhouse at the multi-recreation facility opens
- May 10-12 – Building a Resilient Community Wellness Conference